

Nearly 10 million US seniors food-insecure

Worsening hunger for older Americans

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There has been a staggering growth in the number of seniors who are food-insecure in twenty-first century America. Some 14.7 percent of this age group are said to be food-insecure, totaling at least 9.8 million people. Compared to 2001, this constitutes a rise of 37 percent, with the number of seniors increasing in the same period 109 percent.

In an update posted at Feeding America's web site earlier this month, Professors James Ziliak from the University of Kentucky and Craig Gundersen from the University of Illinois confirmed this worsening hunger situation for Americans age 60 and over. According to the US Census Bureau, about 10,000 people a day turn 60 in the United States, a trend that will continue through 2030.

Feeding America's study, titled "The State of Senior Hunger in America 2015" (and updated this month), noted that the threat of hunger to older people was especially harsh in the South and Southwestern US. And the publication noted that economic hardship constituted the main reason seniors could not obtain sufficient food, despite the government's declaration of an improved economy and the dramatic explosion of Wall Street stock valuations.

The study also concluded that seniors living below the federally recognized poverty line have a 45.3 percent risk of hunger, and that the threat of food insecurity was significantly greater for elderly single adults than for marrieds. The threat of hunger was noted to be three times higher for the disabled elderly. If the seniors had grandchildren in the home, the risk of hunger was twice as high. The number of children living with their grandparents increased 64 percent between 1991 and 2009, to about 7.8 million. At the same time, the majority of hungry seniors live above the official poverty line, with nearly two-thirds reporting insufficient access to needed calories per day to remain healthy.

Almost three of four seniors facing hunger are white, and almost half of the retired seniors in the United States are today at risk for not having enough to eat. The top 10 states with the most persons at and over age 60 who are food-insecure are Mississippi, Louisiana, North Carolina, South

Carolina, Arkansas, New York, West Virginia, Indiana, Oklahoma and Georgia. The sharpest increase in all the groupings of elderly at risk for hunger came after the Great Recession of 2008-2009.

On August 12, 2014, the *Annals of Emergency Medicine* published the results of a two-month review of 138 senior citizens admitted to an emergency department in 2013 and noted that 60 percent were declared malnourished. The reasons included inability to buy food, poor dentition and depression.

Seniors the most food-insecure

Feeding America has referred to seniors as the most food-insecure segment of the US population, noting that one third of its food bank clients are over age 60. On the financial collapse of 2007-2008, Feeding America noted that more than half of its clients over the age of 65 appeared at food banks monthly, and that persons over the poverty line were often not eligible for the federal Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), also known as food stamps, for food relief.

Feeding America considers SNAP, which has suffered frequent budgetary cutbacks, the first line of defense for all food-insecure persons.

The Feeding America studies also note that from 2001 to the present, hunger has cut into a younger and younger demographic, noting that in 2011, 65 percent of the elderly food bank visitors were under age 69. Between 2007 and 2011, the number of elderly food-insecure jumped 50 percent.

The Feeding America hunger study uses a questionnaire from the Current Population Survey (CPS) of the US Census Bureau, submitted to households each December using an 18-question survey focusing on the person's experiences of food stress in the last 30 days and the previous 12 months. A

10-question survey is used for households without children. One to three positively answered questions categorizes a household as under food stress of varying degrees.

Data for the study was also utilized from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS/CDC), a subsidiary of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), wherein 5,000 persons, 50 percent children and 50 percent adults, with seniors purposely over-sampled, are interviewed and examined related to health.

The major findings for hungry seniors concluded that they were taking in 14 percent less iron and 12 percent less protein than their food-secure peers. Health outcomes included an increased risk of at least nine diseases, including a 53 percent increased risk of heart attacks, a 52 percent increased risk of asthma, a 40 percent increased risk of congestive heart failure, along with increased reporting of diabetes and hypertension. Depression unsurprisingly increased 60 percent with hunger. Also, the increased rate of falling and resulting injuries soared among the hungry and malnourished elderly. The measure of Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) fell dramatically, which includes eating, bathing, and dressing oneself independently.

Food insecurity exists in every county of the United States, from 3 percent in Grant County, Kansas, to 38 percent in Jefferson County, Mississippi. Poor households with children are hungry at a rate of 17 percent, and homes with a single mother are food-insecure at 30 percent; single men with children are at 22 percent.

As of 2015, 59 percent of food-insecure households participated in at least one of three federal relief food programs, including SNAP, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

Feeding America provides food assistance to some 46.5 million people a year in the US, including 12 million children and 7 million seniors. Those assisted at Feeding America who also receive food stamps total about 55 percent, and 24 percent are getting food through the WIC program. Nearly all of the families, 94 percent, subscribe to the school lunch program. More than half of the persons receiving assistance had at least one employed person in the household. The median income for households is at \$9,175.

550,000 very low food-secure seniors

About 48 million Americans live in food-insecure households, including 24.4 million people age 18 to 64 and 14.5 million children. The majority of people who are food-

insecure, 57 percent, are not officially recognized by the US government as poor, which means living with an income below the federal poverty level. It is also estimated that almost 550,000 seniors are now essentially starving, with very low food security.

In 2013, one half of those on Medicare had an income below \$23,500, or 200 percent of the federal poverty level of 2015. According to the US Census Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) in 2014, one out of seven people over the age of 65 have incomes rendering them impoverished, including 45 percent of women over 65.

In a recent *National Geographic* article on “Hunger in America,” Janet Poppendieck, a sociologist at City University of New York, was quoted as saying, “Today more working people and their families are hungry because of wages that have declined.”

The article noted that more than half of the US hungry are white, and the total of over 48 million food-insecure people constituted a fivefold jump since the early 1960s, including a 57 percent increase since the early 1990s. The article noted that in the 1980s there existed just a few hundred food pantries in the US. Now, there are over 50,000. One in six persons runs short of food at least once a year in the US, compared to about one in 20 in the European Union.

By 2013, the federal food relief budget had reached \$75 billion, or about \$133.07 per hungry person a month, constituting less than \$1.50 allotted for each meal, often referred to as a “minimum wage diet.” Moreover, hundreds of thousands of poor people in the US do not own or have access to a car, and live more than one half-mile from any source of food, if they had the money to buy it. In Houston, Texas, alone, at least 43,000 households reside in a so-called food desert.

As a global food availability specialist, Raj Patel, told *National Geographic*, “The problem can’t be solved by merely telling people to eat more fruits and vegetables, because at the heart of this [crisis] is a problem about wages, about poverty.”



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